

Walking the Leadership Tightrope

By Wendy Leebov

Effective leaders must learn how to be empathetic, supportive bosses while influencing staff members to make necessary and often difficult changes.

The only sign you can hang on your organization permanently is one that reads “Subject to Change Without Notice.” The health care environment continues to face massive upheaval triggered by consumer expectations, reimbursement, system formation and dissolution, technology, trends related to quality and safety, worker shortages, the global economy, and much more.

Health care leaders need to actively manage this upheaval unless they want their teams to buckle under the strain. As facilitators of change, leaders walk a tightrope. They must keep their balance in the face of what can be two opposing forces: employees resistant to the change who press their leaders to keep the status quo, and the need to champion new approaches to advance the organization’s mission and success strategies.

It is not easy to keep your balance on this tightrope. Four patterns characterize differences among leaders in their stance toward change: victim, critic, observer and facilitator/advocate.

Four Response Patterns

	Victim	Critic	Observer	Facilitator/Advocate
Behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Resists change• Feels angry or depressed• Reverts to old ways• Isolates self• Complains about the process	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Looks for reasons the change will fail• Fails to see potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acts reluctant to get involved• Encourages team to take a “wait and see” attitude• Waits to see what others are going to do	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Looks for ways to minimize negative reactions• Explores reasons for the change• Supports staff• Looks for ways to help• Nurtures people who are affected

	Victim	Critic	Observer	Facilitator/Advocate
Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Can you believe they’re doing this to us?” • “Why is this happening to me again?” • “Why can’t things stay the same?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “This never worked before.” • “This won’t come about.” • “Whose bright idea is this?” • “This will be a flash in the pan.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “If I ignore this, it will go away.” • “I won’t jump in until I know it’s proven.” • “I’m not sticking my neck out on this.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “This change is an opportunity to do things better.” • “While it might need fine-tuning, we can make it work.” • “If it doesn’t work after we’ve given it a solid try, we’ll learn from that and change our approach.” • “I am going to do my part.”

Keeping your balance on this tightrope requires you to empathize with and advocate for staff interests while *at the same time* being a positive force in implementing the change for the organization’s sake. This is not easy.

A Matter of Design

To ensure effective communication with your team, consider a tactic based on the premise that excellent communication is a matter of design. This planned approach has three components: (1) understanding the big-picture context for the change so well that you can articulate it, (2) coming to terms with your own commitment so you can personally support it and (3) planning communication tactics that clarify new processes, acknowledge staff feelings and advance the change rather than hamper it.

It helps to execute the three components in a conscious way. Below, each component is described further, along with tools to help your team develop planned approaches to specific changes.

Understand the big-picture context for the change. Not everyone in a leadership role sees the big picture and how new approaches fit within it. Leaders can’t communicate changes effectively or address resistance constructively if they don’t fully grasp the context for the changes.

Gather your team together, divide them into small groups (three or so people) and ask them to complete the following worksheet.

The Big Picture:

Where Are We? Where Are We Going? Where Do We Fit?

- 1. Goals:** What do we see as the main goals of our organization over the next two years?
- 2. Challenges:** What are the main challenges ahead?
- 3. Current performance:** How are we doing currently in the face of these challenges?

- 4. Success strategies: What are we doing to not only survive, but also be successful?**
5. Strengths: What are the main strengths we have that will help us be successful?
6. How this team fits: How do we see our own team contributing to our organization's success strategies?
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Then, as a large group, share results and fill in any information gaps. Do this periodically to make sure your teams are constantly updating their knowledge. Then, when you're launching or approaching a specific change, ask the following additional question:

- 7. The specific change: Given where we're going and our strategies for success, how does this change fit into the big picture, and how does it help us succeed in pursuit of our goals?**
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By engaging your entire management team in discussions of the big picture, you make sure people share a common-ground understanding of the context for change and can better advance your goals in setting priorities, making decisions and acting in synchrony.

Come to terms with your own commitment. A second component of communicating about a change involves the individual. To be effective as a communicator and catalyst for the change, every leader and manager needs to be able to describe the change in positive terms, showing a personal commitment to it.

Leadership Messages in the Event of Change

Inauthentic or uncommitted messages:

- **"This is a great idea. Let's go for it!"**
- **"This is really misguided, but we're expected to cooperate."**
- **"This too shall pass. In the meantime, please do what needs to be done."**

Authentic message that conveys commitment:

"I understand what we're trying to accomplish with this change. While I have some concerns about it, I'm personally prepared to do all I can to make it work, addressing barriers that arise along the way."

This doesn't mean every leader and manager must actively want the change. Leaders should not pretend to be supportive in order to be a team player. Instead, each leader needs to figure out a stance toward the change that will make it possible to wholeheartedly and authentically do what's needed to make it successful with his or her team.

Plan your communication tactics. Assuming that the leader grasps the big picture and has personally come to terms with the change, the third challenge is to create a blueprint for communication that places the change in the big picture, expresses his or her personal commitment, acknowledges concerns, holds the line and encourages others to join in.

This worksheet helps to synthesize and plan all-important aspects of a change communication.

Change Communication Planning

Good Words

Your main message (about a change or new expectation)

Consequence and benefits (for patients and customers, team, other departments, you, organization)

Pinch of empathy (acknowledgement of what people might be feeling)

Repeat and confirm your main message

Restate your personal commitment (with confidence and optimism and a request for support)

Example for a Change or Improvement

Your main message

“We are initiating a strategy to improve the quality of teamwork across our organization. I want your full participation.”

Consequence and benefits

“When our teamwork falters, we feel the strain and so do our clients. Things fall through cracks. People resent each other, and it drains energy from our important work. By strengthening our teamwork, we can become more efficient and more effective and improve the climate here for us as well.”

Pinch of empathy

“Now I realize that our job is intense. We work hard, and sometimes it’s not easy to consider how others can help or how we can support them.”

Repeat and confirm your main message

“Still, I want us to get on board with our strategy to improve our teamwork.”

Restate your personal commitment

“I’m personally convinced it will pay off for us as well as for our patients, and I personally am going to do my part. I hope you’ll join me in making this work so we all reap the benefits.”

Setting the Stage

The effective leader:

- seizes opportunities to influence the shape of change and invites staff to make input;
- comes to terms with the change personally and helps staff do the same;
- plans how to communicate the change in a respectful way that is considerate of employees while advancing the cause of upper management;
- invites reactions and listens with empathy;
- acknowledges resistant feelings without defensiveness and explains further;

- does not join in with or reinforce a victim stance;
- calmly holds the line, emphasizing the benefits, when the change is non-negotiable;
- role-models resilience and demonstrates that a person can embrace and lead a change without being gung-ho about it;
- shifts focus from “why we can’t” to “how we can”; and
- shows personal ownership and investment while respecting the feelings and concerns of the team.

When managing change, effective leaders manage themselves.

Tools and Resources

Three Tools for Keeping Your Balance

Because of the endless challenges you face as a health care leader, you are never finished. There is always more to do. It's easy to burn out from overwork and endless pressure. Yet, if you lose your balance and allow work to overwhelm your other priorities in life--relationships, interests, physical fitness, families, learning, recreation and hopes for the future--you're likely to feel depleted, disaffected and even cynical. These feelings drain your energy for work and your everyday effectiveness, both at work and outside of work.

Also, when you lose work-life balance, this sends a message to your team. "Who needs this?" they'll ask themselves. "Is this the job for me?"

Here are three tools that help you and your team keep your balance on the leadership tightrope:

1. Inspire Work-Life Balance through Personal Example

Communicate these attitudes through your personal approach to your work and your life. Be blunt. Make these points explicit to your team and they will appreciate you more than you know:

- "I am more than my job. And so are you."
- "I can set limits on my work so I have a life. And so can you."
- "I deserve a break during the day so I can relax and refresh. And so do you."
- "There's more to life than work for me and for you."
- "It's healthy for all of us to have fun at work."
- "I can take my work seriously while also taking myself lightly."
- "I realize I might sometimes drive you to exceed your limits for work, discouraging you from the work-life balance you seek. I'm sorry. I appreciate your help in setting reasonable limits. I want you to feel productive, gratified and satisfied here. I realize that, while this will, I hope, be good for you, it will also be good for the organization."

2. Build Respect for Work-Life Balance within Your Team

Take people by surprise at a leadership meeting by proposing this heartwarming and enlightening team-building exercise:

- State your purpose: You want to find out more about each other's priorities as a basis for strengthening team relationships.
- Ask people to consider this question: "Imagine a wonderful 95th birthday party for you. What would you hope to hear in people's testimonials about you and your life?" Suggest that people jot down a few messages.
- After a few minutes of reflection, listen to each person's imaginings.
- Afterward, ask the group:

- "What themes or patterns emerged?"
- "What implications do you see for our work together?"

Inevitably, issues related to work-life balance will surface, and people can discuss how to help each other take on reasonable, healthy work commitments that will enable them to live according to their dreams.

3. Keep Perspective by Learning Endlessly

Ask these questions of yourself. Also, build your team by engaging them in addressing these questions:

- To what extent do I stay in my comfort zone?
- What have I learned lately?
- How will I seek further information and feedback?
- How much time do I spend learning?
- When was the last time I created an experiment so I could learn from the experience?
- How do I take advantage of informal learning opportunities?
- What can I learn that will renew me?

Coaching on Coaching

To help the people around you advance the organization's priorities, you will need to play the role of coach. You can't call every shot or do every task. There is simply far too much to do. Your only hope lies in developing the capacities and competencies of the people around you, creating a multiplier effect in terms of organizational capability.

Are you an effective coach? Assess your coaching attitudes and behaviors using these 10 tips....

1. Ask questions. Help managers share more by asking open-ended questions rather than yes-no ones. Talk less and question more.

2. Don't judge. People shut down if they feel criticized or labeled. Make sure you state your feedback and observations constructively.

3. Listen carefully. Try to absorb the meaning behind the words. Ask people to explain to be sure you understand. "Tell me more" is a non-threatening way to get people to elaborate.

4. Maintain an open mind. Suspend disbelief; try to understand the manager's approach if it differs from yours. Give people space to experiment and learn.

5. Praise and build on their ideas. "Yes!" and "good idea!" encourage people to continue the dialogue.

6. Focus on the person. Talk about yourself and your experiences sparingly. You won't develop others by talking about yourself at length.

7. Slow down. People won't open up if they feel rushed. Most people need time to

assemble their thoughts, feelings and ideas.

8. Eliminate distractions. Managers will not feel valued if you are doing other things when you are supposed to be talking with them. Don't let phones, beepers, e-mail alerts or other people interrupt this protected time.

9. Less is more. People can't focus on many instructions or many issues at once. Center each discussion on one or two key topics, and build on them in later discussions.

10. Be supportive. Make sure you are not coming across as intimidating or threatening when you offer suggestions. If you want something done in a certain way, make sure you explain how and why. Motivation by fear is notoriously ineffective.

Additional Resources for Health Care Leaders

On Leadership

Bossidy, D., Charam, R., and Burck, C., *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*

Collins, J., *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... And Others Don't*

Goleman, D., *Primal Leadership*

Leebov, W. and Scott, G., *The Indispensable Health Care Manager: Success Strategies for a Changing Environment*

Leebov, W., and Scott, G., *Health Care Managers in Transition: Shifting Roles for Changing Organizations*

Covey, S., Merrill, A.R., and Merrill, R., *First Things First*

Morgenstern, J., *Time Management from the Inside Out*

On Relationship Building

Fisher, R. and Ury, W., *Getting to Yes*

Jones, R., "Conceptual development of nurse-physician collaboration," *Holistic Nurse Practice* 8(3):1-11 [1994]

Kramer, M., and Schmalenberg, C., "Securing good nurse physician relationships," *Nursing Management*, July 2003

Leebov, W., "Assertiveness Skills for Healthcare Professionals," www.iUniverse.com

Peterson, R., *The Assertiveness Workbook: How to Express Your Ideas and Stand Up for Yourself at Work and in Relationships*

Reichheld, F., *Loyalty Rules! How Today's Leaders Build Lasting Relationships in the Digital Age*

Stone, D., et al., *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*
Seligman, M., *Learned Optimism*

Cooper, R., *Executive EQ*

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., Switzler, A., and Covey, S., *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*

On Employee Recognition

Leebov, W., "How Do You Say Thanks: The Manager's Guide to Employee Recognition," copyright (c) 2006 Wendy Leebov and available from Wendy Leebov Inc. (leebovw1@comcast.net or 215-413-1969)

Baudville, a seller of recognition goodies. Its Web site, www.baudville.com, shows

many great tool kit ideas.
Nelson, B., "1001 Ways to Recognize Employees," www.nelson-motivation.com

On Patient Satisfaction and Impressive Customer Service

Berwick, D., Godfrey, A.B., Roessner, J., and Edgman-Levitan, S., *Curing Health Care: New Strategies for Quality Improvement*
Gerteis, M., Edgman-Levitan, S., Daley, J., and Delbanco, T., *Through the Patient's Eyes: Understanding and Promoting Patient-Centered Care*
Leebov, W., Scott, G., and Olson, L., *Achieving Impressive Customer Service: Strategies for the Health Care Manager*
Leebov, W., Afriat, S., and Presha, J., *Service Savvy Health Care: One Goal at a Time*
Leebov, W., and Scott, G., *Service Quality Improvement: The Customer Satisfaction Strategy for Health Care*
Studer, Q., *Hard-wiring Excellence*
Lee, F., *If Disney Ran Your Hospital: 9 Things You Would Do Differently*
Frampton, S., Gilpin, L., and Charmel, P., *Putting Patients First: Designing and Practicing Patient-Centered Care*

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